The Sixth Commandment

Exodus 20:13

Study

This chapter examines the Sixth Commandment as recorded in Exodus 20:13, which protects the sanctity of human life through the simple yet profound declaration, "You shall not murder." This commandment stands as an absolute barrier against the unlawful taking of human life, reflecting God's sovereign authority as the giver and sustainer of all life. The foundation of this commandment reaches back to creation itself, where God formed humanity in His own image and likeness, conferring upon every person inherent dignity and worth that must not be violated. The Hebrew word *ratsach*, translated "murder," specifically refers to unlawful killing, distinguishing this prohibition from capital punishment, just warfare, and legitimate self-defense, which God's law permits under proper authority.

We will explore the theological foundations of the commandment in God's creative work and the image of God in humanity, examine its comprehensive scope as expounded by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and consider contemporary applications, including abortion, euthanasia, and societal violence. The Lord Jesus revealed that this commandment reaches far beyond the physical act of killing to address the attitudes and actions that lead to murder, including anger, contempt, hatred, and verbal abuse. The commandment requires not only that we refrain from taking life but that we actively value, protect, and preserve it, pursuing peace, showing mercy, and demonstrating love even toward our enemies. For the Church, this commandment calls believers to examine their hearts for murderous attitudes while pointing ultimately to Jesus Christ, who perfectly fulfilled this law and bore the penalty for our disobedience through His sacrificial death on the cross.

Introduction

"You shall not murder." Four simple words that touch the very foundation of human existence and God’s authority. This commandment stands as an absolute barrier against the ultimate crime, the unlawful taking of human life. In a world where violence fills our news feeds and entertainment, where abortion destroys millions of unborn children, where euthanasia is increasingly promoted as compassionate care, and where hatred festers in human hearts, this

commandment speaks with urgent clarity. God alone is the author of life, and He alone has the right to determine when life ends.

The sixth commandment protects something precious beyond measure, human life created in the image of God. Like all the commandments, it reaches far deeper than the physical act of killing. It addresses the anger, hatred, and malice that murder in the heart long before hands commit violence. It calls us to value life, pursue peace, and love our neighbors as ourselves. In Christ, we find not only the perfect fulfillment of this command but also the power to overcome the murderous impulses of our sinful nature.

From the very beginning, God has been the giver and sustainer of life. He breathed into Adam the breath of life, and man became a living soul. Every heartbeat, every breath, every moment of existence comes from His creative and sustaining power. Life is His gift, and it remains under His sovereign control. When God placed humanity in the garden, He gave dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and every living thing that moves on the earth. But nowhere did He grant humanity authority over human life itself. That belongs to God alone.

This commandment, therefore, is not merely a rule for social order, though it is that. It is not merely a necessity for the growth of humanity, though it is that as well. At its deepest level, this commandment is a declaration about the nature of God, the value of human life, and the boundaries of human authority. It reminds us that we are creatures, not the Creator. We are stewards of life, not its owners. We live and move and have our being in Him, and our days are numbered by His decree, not ours.

The Meaning of the Command

The Hebrew word translated "murder" in this commandment is *ratsach*, which specifically refers to the unlawful killing of another human being. This is not a blanket prohibition against all taking of life. The same law that forbids murder also prescribes capital punishment for certain crimes, authorizes warfare under specific circumstances, and permits killing in legitimate self-defense. The commandment targets the unauthorized, malicious destruction of human life, whether through premeditated murder, manslaughter arising from negligence or passion, or any other form of unlawful killing.

This distinction matters greatly. God's law recognizes that civil authorities bear the sword to punish evildoers, that soldiers may fight in just wars, and that individuals may defend themselves and others against violent attack. What the commandment forbids is personal vengeance, acts of violence based on hatred or rage, killings motivated by greed or jealousy, and the destruction of innocent life. At its heart, this commandment guards the principle that human life is sacred because humans alone bear God's image, and only God has the ultimate authority to give and take life.

The foundation for this commandment reaches back to creation itself. When God made humanity, He formed us in His own image and likeness. This divine image, though terribly marred by sin, remains stamped upon every human being. We are not merely intelligent animals or highly evolved primates. We are creatures uniquely fashioned to reflect God's character, to relate to Him personally, and to live forever. This image bearing dignity means that to murder another person is to assault God Himself, to destroy what He has made in His likeness, to usurp His sovereign authority over life and death.

After the flood, God established this principle explicitly with Noah. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" (Genesis 9:6). Here we see both the sanctity of human life and the serious consequences for violating it. Capital punishment for murder is not revenge but recognition that human life has such value that only another human life can atone for its unlawful destruction. The image of God in each person makes murder the gravest of crimes against humanity.

This image of God principle has many implications. It means that every human being, regardless of age, ability, race, or condition, possesses inherent dignity and worth. The unborn child in the womb bears God's image. The elderly person suffering from dementia bears God's image. The severely disabled individual bears God's image. The criminal on death row bears God's image. The enemy soldier bears God's image. Western culture has drifted far from the day when respect for human life was inherent in all. R. Albert Mohler Jr. comments about this trend. He writes, "The great liberal dream was that somehow you could have human rights and human dignity without Christianity. That somehow, while separating us from a biblical conception of what it means to be a human being, we can develop respect for one another, and human dignity could

prevail."[1] Our value does not come from our productivity, intelligence, physical abilities, beauty, or social standing. It comes from the simple fact that we are all made in the image and likeness of God.

In addition, this commandment reveals something essential about God's character. The God who forbids murder is the God who values life, who treasures His image bearers, and who grieves over death and destruction. He is not distant or indifferent to human suffering. He does not view human beings as disposable or expendable. Every life matters to Him. Every person is known to Him. Every death is weighed by Him. The psalmist declares that nothing can compare with God's thoughts towards those who trust in God.[2] He knows when we sit down and when we rise up. He discerns our thoughts from afar.[3] Such intimate knowledge and care form the backdrop for this commandment.

The Scope of the Command

While the primary meaning concerns physical killing, the scope of the sixth commandment extends much further. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed the heart of this law when He said, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matthew 5:21-22).

The Lord Jesus traces murder back to its roots in the human heart. Anger, contempt, verbal abuse, these are the seedbed from which murder grows. The Pharisees prided themselves on never having committed murder, but their hearts seethed with hatred toward others. They cursed their enemies and harbored grudges. They may have kept their hands clean of blood, but their hearts were guilty of murder. Jesus exposes this hypocrisy and shows that God's law searches the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

The apostle John makes this connection even more explicit. "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15). We

[1] R. Albert Mohler Jr., address at the Ligonier National Conference, Orlando, FL, March 9, 2017.
[2] "You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you!" (Psalm 40:5).
[3] "You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar" (Psalm 139:2).

might say that hatred is murder in seed form. The person who maintains bitterness, who refuses to forgive, who wishes ill upon another, or who delights in another's misfortune violates the spirit of this commandment even if they never raise a hand in violence. God sees the heart, and in His sight, malicious thoughts are the moral equivalent of malicious deeds.

This means the commandment requires more than simply refraining from killing. In the sixth commandment, God demands that we actively value and protect human life. We must pursue peace, seek reconciliation, forgive those who wrong us, and love even our enemies. We must speak well of others, defend the defenseless, care for the vulnerable, and promote human flourishing. The sixth commandment calls us to be life givers, not life takers, peacemakers rather than troublemakers, reconcilers instead of dividers.

Consider how comprehensive this commandment becomes when we understand its full scope. It forbids not only the physical act of murder but also the attitudes and actions that lead to murder. It condemns anger that is nursed and cultivated rather than quickly resolved. It prohibits contempt, that attitude of superiority and disdain that views others as worthless or beneath consideration. It forbids insulting and abusive language that tears down rather than builds up. It condemns malicious gossip and slander that destroy reputations and relationships.

But the commandment goes even further. It requires positive action to preserve and protect life. The Westminster Larger Catechism, in explaining this commandment, lists not only what is forbidden but also what is required. We are commanded to preserve our own lives and the lives of others, to resist all thoughts and purposes that threaten life, to use lawful means for preserving life, to show mercy and compassion, to be peacemakers, and to bear the hand of God patiently in any affliction He sends.

This positive dimension of the commandment shapes how, by the grace of God, we ought to live. We should care for our own health and safety, not recklessly endangering ourselves through foolish behavior or sinful habits. We should care for the health and safety of others, warning them of danger, helping them in times of need, and providing for those who cannot provide for themselves. We should advocate for the weak and vulnerable. To be sure, none of us, apart from Christ, has kept or can keep this command perfectly. But the law remains a rule of life that guides the believer in grateful obedience.

Contemporary Applications

In our modern context, this commandment speaks to several pressing issues. First and most urgently, it condemns abortion as the murder of innocent human life. From the moment of conception, a unique human being exists, fashioned by God in His image, possessing an eternal soul, and deserving of protection. The unborn child is not merely potential life or a clump of cells. He or she is a person, fearfully and wonderfully made, known to God before formation in the womb.

The biblical testimony on this point is clear and consistent. The psalmist declares, "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:13–14a). God's creative work begins at conception, not at birth. Jeremiah records God's word to him, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jeremiah 1:5a). John the Baptist leaped in his mother's womb at the presence of the unborn Jesus. Throughout Scripture, the unborn are treated as persons, as human beings with identity and value.

The arguments for abortion, whether based on convenience, economics, or even cases of rape or severe fetal abnormality, cannot override the fundamental truth that God alone has the right to give and take life. We do not become the Creator by choosing which lives have value and which do not. The destruction of more than sixty million unborn children in America since 1973 represents a holocaust of staggering proportions, a national sin that cries out to heaven for justice. Christians must speak clearly and act courageously to defend these most vulnerable members of our society.

This does not mean we respond to women facing crisis pregnancies with condemnation or harshness. Rather, we are called to show compassion, to offer practical help, to support adoption as an alternative, to provide resources for young mothers, and to create a culture that truly values both mother and child. We must be willing to put our resources where our convictions are, supporting pregnancy centers, foster care, and adoption agencies. We must also work for legal protections for the unborn while ministering with grace to those who have been wounded by abortion.

In addition, the commandment addresses euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. The modern movement to legalize the killing of the elderly, the disabled, and the suffering represents a fundamental rejection of God's sovereignty and the sanctity of human life. We do not have the right to end our own lives or to help others end theirs, regardless of the pain or difficulty they face. Life is God's gift, and He alone determines when it should end. Our calling is to provide compassionate care, effective pain management, and loving presence to those who suffer, not to assist in their deaths.

The arguments for euthanasia often rest on appeals to autonomy, dignity, and compassion. But true dignity does not come from our ability to control the circumstances of our death. It comes from bearing the image of God, a dignity that remains regardless of our physical or mental condition. And true compassion does not kill the suffering; it comforts them, cares for them, and walks with them through the valley of the shadow of death. The rise of hospice care and palliative medicine shows that we can address pain and suffering without resorting to intentionally ending life.

The sixth commandment also speaks to issues of violence in our society. While recognizing the legitimacy of capital punishment and just warfare, Christians should be committed to peace, to the resolution of conflicts through lawful means, and to the protection of human life. We should oppose acts of terrorism, hate crimes, gang violence, and all forms of assault. We should work for justice while refusing to take vengeance into our own hands. We should support law enforcement while also advocating for the fair and humane treatment of all people.

In our personal relationships, this commandment calls us to examine our hearts for anger, bitterness, and malice. Do we harbor grudges against those who have wronged us? Do we refuse to forgive? Do we speak harshly or abusively to others? Do we gossip or slander? Do we wish harm upon our enemies? These attitudes and actions violate the spirit of the sixth commandment. We must repent of them and seek God's grace to love others as Christ has loved us.

The commandment also has implications for how we use our words. James warns us that the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness, setting on fire the entire course of life. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. Our words have the power to give life or to kill. They can build up or tear down, encourage or

discourage, heal or wound. When we use our words to attack, demean, or destroy others, we violate the spirit of this commandment.

Our Failure and God's Grace

If we are honest, we must confess our guilt before this commandment. Even if we have never physically harmed another person, we have all been angry without cause. We have all spoken harsh words. We have all harbored resentment and refused to forgive. We have all, in thought if not in deed, wished ill upon others. By the standard Jesus sets, by the requirement to love perfectly and constantly, we all stand condemned as murderers in our hearts.

The problem runs deeper than isolated acts of anger or hatred. It goes to the very core of our fallen nature. Jeremiah declares that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick.[4] Jesus teaches that from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. We are not sinners because we sin, we sin because we are sinners. The seeds of murder lie dormant in every human heart, waiting for the right circumstances to sprout.

Moreover, we have often failed to value and protect life as we should. We have been silent when we should have spoken for the unborn. We have ignored the suffering of others when we could have helped. We have been indifferent to injustice and violence. We have failed to be peacemakers and reconcilers. Our sins of omission are as real as our sins of commission, and they too make us guilty before God's holy law.

Consider how many times we have failed to show mercy when mercy was needed. How many times have we passed by on the other side like the priest and Levite in Jesus' parable, leaving the wounded to suffer alone? How many times have we withheld forgiveness when forgiveness was sought? How many times have we chosen our comfort over another person's need? How many times have we valued our possessions, our time, our preferences above the welfare of our neighbor?

The commandment also exposes our failure to love our enemies. Jesus commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. But we find this impossibly difficult. We want to

[4] Jeremiah 17:9

return evil for evil, insult for insult. We want those who wrong us to suffer. We take pleasure in their misfortune. We refuse to forgive and refuse to forget. We nurse our grievances and rehearse our wrongs. In doing so, we prove ourselves guilty of violating this commandment in its fullest sense.

But here again, the gospel shines with glorious light. Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled this commandment in our place. He never harbored anger or malice. He never spoke a word in hatred. He blessed those who cursed Him and prayed for those who persecuted Him. When He was reviled, He did not revile in return. When He suffered, He did not threaten but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly. He was the perfect peacemaker, the ultimate reconciler, the one who gave His own life to save others.

Consider the remarkable restraint and love Jesus showed throughout His earthly ministry. When the soldiers came to arrest Him in Gethsemane, Peter drew his sword and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his ear. Jesus immediately healed the man and rebuked Peter, saying, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). He could have called down twelve legions of angels to defend Him, but He chose instead to submit to arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

More than that, Jesus bore the penalty for our violation of this commandment. All our anger, all our hatred, all our malice, all our violence of thought and word and deed, He carried to the cross. The innocent one died for the guilty. The life giver suffered death. The Prince of Peace endured the violence of crucifixion. And in His death, He made atonement for our sins, satisfying God's justice and opening the way for our forgiveness and reconciliation.

When we trust in Christ, His perfect obedience to this commandment is credited to our account. God sees us not as murderers but as righteous, not as hate-filled but as loving, not as guilty but as forgiven. We are justified, declared righteous in God's sight, based on Christ's work rather than our own. This is the heart of the gospel: Jesus has done for us what we could never do for ourselves.

The cross demonstrates both God's hatred of sin and His love for sinners. He did not simply overlook our violations of this commandment. He did not minimize our guilt or excuse our

failures. Justice demanded payment, and payment was made. But the payment came from God Himself, in the person of His Son, who willingly took our place and bore our punishment. This is love beyond comprehension, grace beyond measure, mercy beyond understanding.

Living in Light of the Command

For those who have been saved by grace through faith in Christ, this commandment now becomes a guide for grateful obedience. The Holy Spirit who indwells us gives us both the desire and the power to love others as Christ has loved us. We are called to put away anger, bitterness, and malice, to forgive as we have been forgiven, to seek peace and pursue it, to value every human life as precious in God's sight.

This means we must guard our hearts against the seeds of murder. When anger arises, we must deal with it quickly, refusing to let the sun go down on our wrath. Paul commands us, "Be angry and do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil" (Ephesians 4:26-27). Anger itself is not always sinful; there is such a thing as righteous anger against injustice and evil. But anger must be controlled, directed properly, and resolved quickly, before it turns into bitterness and hatred.

When someone wrongs us, we must forgive, remembering the vast debt God has forgiven us in Christ. Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant who, after being forgiven an enormous debt, refused to forgive his fellow servant a tiny debt. The master's response is severe, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" Forgiveness is not optional for the Christian. It is the necessary response of those who have themselves been forgiven.

When tempted to speak harshly, we must choose words that build up rather than tear down. Paul instructs us, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29). Our words should minister grace, encourage faith, strengthen the weak, comfort the sorrowful, and point others to Christ. This requires intentionality and self-control, a willingness to pause before speaking and to consider the effect our words will have.

When confronted with injustice, we must act with courage while refusing to take vengeance into our own hands. Paul writes, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him something to drink" (Romans 12:19-20). We pursue justice through proper channels while showing mercy and kindness even to those who wrong us.

We must also actively promote and protect human life. This includes supporting the unborn through pregnancy centers, adoption services, and legal advocacy. It includes caring for the elderly, the disabled, and the suffering through hospice care, practical assistance, and loving presence. It includes working for justice and peace in our communities, supporting law enforcement, and advocating for the fair treatment of all people.

In our families, this commandment calls us to create homes marked by peace, forgiveness, and mutual respect. Husbands must love their wives as Christ loved the church, never using harsh words or physical force. Wives must respect their husbands, speaking with kindness and grace. Parents must discipline their children without exasperation or abuse, remembering that they too are image bearers of God. Children must honor their parents without resentment or rebellion. The family should be a place where life is nurtured and protected, where conflicts are resolved through forgiveness, where every member is valued and loved.

In the church, we must be committed to unity and peace. We must refuse to gossip or slander. We must speak the truth in love. We must bear with one another's weaknesses and forgive one another's offenses. We must pursue reconciliation when conflicts arise. We must care for those who are hurting and defend those who are vulnerable. The church should be known as a community where life is cherished and love abounds, where the world can see the transforming power of the gospel in our relationships with one another.

This also means we should be known for our gentleness and self-control. Peter instructs us to be ready to make a defense to anyone who asks us for a reason for the hope that is in us, but to do so with gentleness and respect. Our defense of truth should never come at the expense of love. Our zeal for righteousness should never degenerate into harsh judgmentalism. Our commitment to biblical standards should never lead us to treat others with contempt or cruelty.

The Ultimate Life Giver

As we reflect on the sixth commandment, we are pointed ultimately to Christ, who is Himself the resurrection and the life. He came that we might have life and have it abundantly. He laid down His life for His sheep. He conquered death and rose from the grave, breaking the power of sin and Satan. In Him, we who were dead in our trespasses and sins have been made alive. We who deserved death have been given eternal life.

This is the heart of the Christian gospel. We were spiritually dead, enslaved to sin, condemned by God's law, destined for eternal judgment. But Christ, in His great love, came to rescue us. He lived the life we should have lived, keeping every commandment perfectly. He died the death we deserved to die, bearing the penalty for our sins. He rose from the dead, conquering sin and death and hell. And now He offers forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life to all who trust in Him.

When we believe in Christ, we are born again, made new creatures, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and adopted into God's family. The old has passed away, the new has come. We who were once characterized by anger, hatred, and malice are now being transformed into the image of Christ, growing in love, patience, and kindness. We who once gave death now give life, we who once sowed discord now make peace, we who once harbored bitterness now extend forgiveness.

This transformation is not instantaneous or automatic. It is a process, a lifelong journey of sanctification in which we are being conformed to the likeness of Christ. We still struggle with anger and selfishness. We still fail to love as we should. We still need daily forgiveness and grace. But the Spirit who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion. The God who saved us will also sanctify us. The Christ who died for us will also transform us.

The promise of resurrection life gives us hope in the midst of a death filled world. We live in a fallen world where violence and hatred seem to triumph, where the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper, where death appears to have the final word. But we know that death's reign is temporary. Christ has conquered death, and one day He will return to make all things new. The graves will open, the dead will rise, and death itself will be thrown into the lake of fire.

One day, when Christ returns and resurrection morning dawns, this transformation will be complete. We will be fully conformed to His image, perfectly holy, completely free from sin and

death. We will live forever in the new heavens and new earth, where there will be no more mourning or crying or pain, where death itself will be no more, where the lion will lie down with the lamb and swords will be beaten into plowshares. Until that day, we live in hope, knowing that He who promised is faithful and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In that day, this commandment will no longer be needed, for there will be no murder, no hatred, no violence, no death. All who dwell in the new creation will love perfectly, forgive completely, and live in peace eternally. We will see Christ face to face, the One who is the author and giver of life, and we will worship Him forever. This is our great hope, this is our certain future, this is the promise that sustains us as we seek to live faithfully in obedience to this commandment.

Conclusion

The sixth commandment, "You shall not murder," reveals both our sin and our Savior. It shows us the sanctity of human life and the seriousness of destroying it. It exposes the hatred in our hearts and calls us to love. It condemns our anger and bitterness while pointing us to the One who forgave His murderers from the cross. It demands perfect love for our neighbors while declaring that Christ has loved us perfectly.

As we examine ourselves in light of this commandment, we must confess our guilt. We have failed to value life as God values it. We have harbored anger and refused to forgive. We have spoken harshly and acted maliciously. We stand condemned by God's holy law and deserving of His judgment. But in Christ, we find forgiveness, righteousness, and life. He has kept this commandment in our place. He has borne the penalty for our violations. He has given us His Spirit to transform us from the inside out.

May we then live in light of this great salvation. May we value every human life as precious in God's sight. May we put away anger and bitterness. May we forgive as we have been forgiven. May we pursue peace and seek reconciliation. May we speak words that give life rather than death. May we be known as people who love others as Christ has loved us. And may our lives bear witness to the One who is the resurrection and the life, who died that we might live, and who will one day make all things new.

This commandment calls us to something far greater than mere external conformity to a rule. It calls us to a transformation of heart that can only come through the power of the gospel. It calls us to love as we have been loved, to forgive as we have been forgiven, to give life as life has been given to us. May God grant us grace to live in obedience to this commandment, not in our own strength but in the strength that comes from Christ, the ultimate life-giver, who loved us and gave Himself for us.

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105).